

BAD LOVE

Aleksander Sowa



bad

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To Mazik

I.

Hi, my name is Ann. I'm almost six years old and I am a typical little girl. Well, not quite in fact, and the story I'm going to tell you will prove it. A love story. I know, you may say that I am just a little girl. A little girl who knows nothing about love. A little girl who knows nothing of beauty, fate, sins or loneliness. Yes, probably you're right. Six-year-olds with shiny-fair pigtails usually know more about dolls' clothing than about these adult things. True. But it doesn't mean that it has to be like that this time. After all, I don't think that being an adult makes you know much more about these things anyways. And I dare say that I am pretty much right. And I dare say that you know nothing about what you're going to read here, even more so because this is a true story about bad love.

II.

"You know, Daddy, when I grow up I'm going to become a writer. This is what I've decided. People become different people, don't they? I mean, they stay who they were but what they do is different."

"But sometimes it is a different walk of life than the one they dreamed of" said the girl's father.

“Yes, I know, but sometimes it is exactly what they’ve dreamed of, isn’t it, Daddy?”

“Uhhh”.

“Mummy says that she wanted to become an engine driver. She wanted to drive huge locomotives. Almost as big as the other one.”

“Which one?”

“The one from the book we have in the kindergarten,” I explained.

“And?”

“Mummy didn’t become an engine driver. She didn’t even become a ticket inspector. She became a typist instead. And she can also sew clothes for my dolls.”

“Yes, she can. I’ve seen the checked shorts she sewed for your teddy bear.” said father.

“For Egon,” I specified. “I love when mummy sews, we can talk then. Once she said: ‘I am very happy, even though I am not an engine driver.’ ‘How come?’ I asked – ‘You don’t do what you wanted to do.’ ‘But I do.’”, she whispered in my ear and winked. “The locomotive is a noisy machine, a machine difficult to operate, exactly like the sewing machine. So I do operate a noisy and complicated machine.” “Maybe,” I said, without a conviction and added, “I am going to be a woman writer.” “A fire fighter?” was mummy’s surprising answer. “You need to know, Daddy, that mum’s ears are getting worse and worse. It’s probably because of the noise the sewing machine and the typewriter make. Sometimes you need to say something twice before she is able to hear what you said.” “No,

Mummy. A woman writer.” I repeated – “That means a woman who writes books of stories for children. Like the one about the locomotive.”

“About the locomotive?” asked mummy with a smile. “Yes. As far as I know that *woman* writer was a *man* writer and his name was Julian Tuwim. I can’t really remember.” I admitted a bit embarrassed. “But this doesn’t stop me from becoming a *woman* writer.”

I laughed and hugged Mummy. You see, Daddy, little girls want to become doctors or teachers. Those brave ones dream of being flight attendants and of flying planes which can seat as many people as the strawberries I once ate.

“Strawberries?” he asked

“Yes”

“In grandma’s garden?” my father wanted to know.

“Yes.”

“And boys?”

“Well, boys, they want to be sheriffs,” I said with dislike, “firefighters or footballers. They want to play for very important prizes on very big pitches. So big that I can’t even imagine how much popcorn people eat there, and how much coke they drink. Both football and boys are boring. But if you listen to them long enough – I added – they may seem interesting.

“I see,” said father after a while.

“I wanted to become a woman writer. And I have become one. But, you know, Daddy, I think Mum was right when she said I should become a fighter.”

“Was she? Why?”

“Then I could have fought the shell that was growing around me.”

“But you didn’t and the shell has grown, is that right?”

III.

As a writer I’m going to make up my stories at night. Then, I am going to write them and sell the books. They will have hard, colorful covers. They will wait for smiling children and their mothers in bookshops, full of shelves. I don’t know if writers do this but this is what I am going to do.

“I think that this is exactly what writers do,” said my father, earnestly.

“Do you?”

“Yes, of course,” he nodded his head and asked, “why don’t you tell me a story, Ann?”

“What about?”

“About whatever you want,” he answered with a grin.

“All right. Can it be a story about a dreams photographer?”

“Sounds interesting but you have to choose. It may as well be about a wizard if you want.”

“It will be about a dream,” I decided after a while.

“Perfect.”

I pondered for a while on what he just said: “There is something about it, although I don’t really know what, as I am still a very little girl. A girl with clear plans

for the future, though. I haven't learned what love, hope, fate, beauty or sin is yet but I'll grow up, won't I?"

"Of course, Ann," agreed my father, "your plans are like a line."

"The line which Mummy uses to hang the laundry on?"

"Similar," he nodded, "Though it doesn't really matter what kind of line. Life is about choosing. We follow a line to finally find what we are looking for. Everyone chooses his or her own way."

"I don't know much about ways," I admitted, "apart from the fact that not every one may be as good. But none of them are bad until we reach their end."

"It's good to have someone to march with. We can draw the line we want to follow but we can't choose the people we'll meet during our trip," said my father, with a voice as if it was something very important.

"Right, Daddy, let me start," I said and after a while I started my story. "I had a very weird dream. It was a dream about a story with a surprising ending. As a writer I wrote it down after I woke up. And now I'm going to tell you this very story."

IV.

The room was filled with darkness, only a smudge of moonlight lit up my bed. That was still long before the morning, Daddy. I think a half an hour maybe. Or even a half and an hour.

“An hour and a half,” I heard a voice in my head.

I looked at the alarm clock. I thought it had rung and it was time to get up. Kindergarten time. “Before I start working as a professional writer I have to learn to get up on time, don’t I, Daddy? You said so once.” And this is what kindergarten teaches you. And then the school. But school is in the very, very distant future, not before summer holidays, so let’s get back to the alarm clock. I thought that it had woken me up but it hadn’t, it only played a trick on me and didn’t ring at all. It was only a sign on my dreamy way.

“We say ‘an hour and a half,’” I heard again.

Then I understood. I didn’t wake up at all, Daddy, I was still asleep. I even let the dream last. I just wondered where the voice in my head came from. Did the alarm clock speak?

“That’s impossible.” the same voice replied in my thoughts.

“Who are you?” I asked terrified. I got scared – you don’t often hear strange voices in your head, sitting in a dark room especially, when you’re a six year-old girl.

But this time the darkness did not reply. I didn’t hear any voice. However, I felt that somebody was looking, no – staring – at me.

He was there, right beside me. Not the voice, of course, but... a little boy.

“You haven’t seen me for a while, Daddy, so you don’t know. I’m a big girl now. I’m in the reception class already. I learn how to read, write and count. It will help me when I become a professional writer, so

my teacher says. It's called a good basis." The boy was really small. He didn't say anything, just looked.

"What's your name?" I was curious.

"I can't tell you now," he said slowly and clearly. "But I promise you that you'll figure it out yourself."

"Promise?" I repeated, not sure if unusual night guests are reliable.

"Promise," the boy assured me.

"Swear to God," I demanded coldly. Boys have always respected me. I've always handled them perfectly well. But this one, instead of doing what I demanded from him, made a strange gesture. Like a magician, he moved his hand just in front of my face, from left to right. In this very moment everything gleamed. Shone. Then, without asking, he took me by the hand.

"Can you imagine, Daddy? A bit unbecoming, I reckoned, especially that he was definitely younger than me. Still, I was so curious I didn't protest. You know, Daddy, I had never flown before, maybe apart from that one time on the carousel, when I almost did." So, he just grabbed my hand and I flew. I rose with him and we flew into the light as if we both were birds.

"I'm scared," I screamed, terrified.

"There's no need to be scared," whispered the boy after a while, "there's something very important I want to show you."

"But I can't fly!" I didn't stop screaming.

"Yes, you can. You can do everything. You just need to feel you really want it."

And I rose with him.

V.

We landed in a big, dark house. In fact the house itself wasn't that big but I felt so small there, like never before.

"Why are we here?" I asked.

"It's just the beginning."

"The beginning of what?"

"Let me take you on a trip," he said, looking into my eyes.

"A trip to where?" I wanted to know.

The truth is, I didn't like it there at all. The place was stenchy. There were empty bottles all over the place, and the cigarette smoke stung my eyes. There was an old stove. People call such stoves tiled stoves. The floor squeaked under every step. And, in that moment, I realized that neither mine nor the boy's feet actually touched the floor.

"You see," started the boy in a very solemn voice, "sometimes it is not the destination of the trip that is the most important, but the way you take to reach it."

"Weird words," I commented.

"Maybe," he agreed and added quickly, "or maybe you just think so."

"Why do you think so?" I asked

"Because..." a moment of hesitation, "because it's your trip, not mine. Look," he drew my attention to the inside of the house.

There were people. Their feet touched that dirty floor. They looked familiar but I couldn't make out

where I could have met them before. That was a strange feeling – I saw people but at the same time they looked as if they'd just escaped from some old time, blurry photographs.

“What else can you see?” the boy asked.

“A drunkard at the table.”

“Drunkard? How do you know he’s a drunkard?”

“I don’t know but he looks like a drunkard. He’s pouring vodka and he’s crying. And the girl is playing with an empty bottle. ”

“What girl?”

“She looks just like me. I wouldn’t say she’s older than six, and I’m sure she hasn’t started school yet. What’s your name? ” I asked her with a smile.

“My name’s Amnesia. And yours?”

I looked at her and then at the boy and his warm, blue eyes. It struck me that he got sad. His face was not so bright and his eyes not so sparkling as at the beginning of our trip. “I can’t explain it, Daddy, but I somehow knew that he let me play with that girl, though he didn’t utter a word.”

“Strange name,” I sat next to her on the floor. “What’s its origin?”

“I don’t remember,” she said, still playing with a bottle.

I hoped to make friends with her, so I tried to keep the conversation going, “you’re playing with a bottle. What’s the game called?”

“Love.”

“Love? I don’t know this game. How do you play it?”

“Don’t you know?” she asked.

I realized that I didn’t really know. In that moment I got a sudden shiver down my spine. The boy did it again, he looked at me with those blue eyes and I heard the same whispering voice, although his lips didn’t move at all. “Yes, you do know. Trust me.” The girl kept playing oblivious to our ‘conversation’.

“I’m hungry,” she said changing the subject. “I haven’t eaten for so long.”

The man at the table didn’t react to the girl’s words. He downed another glass, and looking at the girl, started to cry. Teardrops, massive and colorless, went down his face.

“Why did he cry, Ann?” I heard my father’s voice.

“I’m not sure. I think that he lied to someone.”

“How do you know that?”

“I heard him sob: ‘I lost my way to you. I got lost and I don’t know where to go to find you.’”

“Sir!” I tried to catch his attention. I couldn’t understand how he possibly didn’t notice the girl. She was wearing a pink dress! “Sir!” I repeated louder but he didn’t hear me. He was still sobbing.

“I search for you, whether you want it or not. I search for you whether I want it or not. This is my disease.”

“Who is he speaking to?” I asked the boy but he didn’t reply. He disappeared. This was as sudden as was his appearance some time earlier. And the girl

disappeared too. I was left alone. I felt so immensely alone that I didn't know what to do with myself. There was only me and the crying man with hollow cheeks, sitting at the table covered with a plastic tablecloth, drinking vodka and looking blankly in front of him. But he didn't see me. I don't think he saw anything around him apart from his bottle and his glass. He was like a blind man led by a dog.

"You've been in my heart, deep down on the rock bottom, ever since I saw you for the first time," he kept sobbing. "Only sometimes do you come close to the surface to remind me of you- like today. Still, I keep searching for you. Where are you?" he cried knowing well that the answer would not come. "I'm so scared that I won't find you, that I won't find the real you!"

I grew sad. I felt so sorry for him. He was drunk, so what? He was miserable. I stood there looking at him and wondered, Daddy, did he want to find this girl who had played by his feet or did he search for someone else?

VI.

I felt the boy's blue eyes on me again. And I felt so warm, Daddy. No, in fact, I felt hot and stuffy. Suddenly, I understood why – the whole place, the room where the man was drinking vodka and the girl who was sitting on the floor, was on fire.

“We’ve got to run away!” I shouted to the boy and started to run, although I didn’t know where to run to escape the place. In that moment, the boy took my hand and again, without moving his lips, he pointed at the door and said:

“This way.”

I followed his eyes and saw two doors. “Which one?” I asked. I ran to the door on the left and lifted the handle but the door was closed. Quickly, to save time, Daddy, I ran to the second door, and sighed with relief – the door creaked open.

“It’s your fault,” I heard when I took the first step forward.

Behind the door, deep inside, in the world beyond the fire, stood the same drunkard. But now he was all ablaze. His hair, his shoulders, his clothes – he was all in red and blue flames. The door frame and all the windows in the house were on fire. The thick plaits of smoke hovered beneath the ceiling in the corridor.

“Me?” I shouted terrified, “What have I done?”

“You chose the wrong door,” he said.

I turned around. The floor, the walls and even the ceiling, were burning.

“I was so scared, Daddy.”

“What were you scared of, Ann?”

“That it will hurt.”

“Life hurts, but we’re not scared of the pain. What we are scared of is the fear of this pain.”

“Maybe you’re right, Daddy. Fortunately, it didn’t hurt at all. And then I saw him behind the wall of flames.”

“The boy?”

“Yes, he was standing behind a huge flame. My little friend, with a shiny key on a green string, hanging on his neck. The key glittered on the boy’s chest. He stood there with these sad eyes, as the fire raged between us.”

“It is your fault, this fire,” I heard the same voice behind me.

“It’s not true!” I protested. I was so scared but I decided to get the key. And I decided not to cry, although it seemed to be the most reasonable thing to do, except for picking up the key, of course. “Without it I won’t be able to escape from here,” I thought. I was terrified. I took a step in the boy’s direction but the flames between us grew higher. When I took another step he was completely behind the fire.

“I can’t,” it flashed through my mind, “I can’t. I’m just a little girl.”

“You won’t know if you don’t try,” struck me a thought, from my friend’s head.

I gritted my teeth. I knew I had to do this. I jumped into the fire to tear the key off the string around his neck. The key was cold. The tight string snapped. I held the key in my hand and everything around me got red. I could smell burnt feathers. The same odour I smelled when I visited my grandma at the village.

“Did your hair catch on fire?”